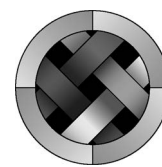


ARTS EDUCATION

Art Smart

Art classes rarely schools' top priority, yet research suggests they should be



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By Sarah Shelton

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On a sunny spring afternoon in northeast Denver, Celesta Cairns' third graders at Cole Arts and Science Academy are working in groups with professional musicians to orchestrate a concert from start to finish. Sixty-three young composers are making sounds from keyboards and drums to "illustrate" the stories they have just written.

"What I like best is getting to work with my friends to make up a story," says Matt, age 9, one of the young composers. "It was fun to make up a story with some friends.

Our story was about three sharks called 'Fred's Adventures.' But it was way more interesting when we got to add music to it."

The professional musicians in the Colorado Symphony's Very Young Composers program transcribe the sounds the kids make into real musical notes, and at the end of the school year perform the compositions. The concert attracts parents and children who rarely, if ever, attend musical performances or go to the theater. For many of Matt's classmates, this was the first time they or their families had ever been to a symphony.

Cole Elementary is used to receiving more attention for its failures than for its successes. It has a history of lagging test scores and low attendance rates, for example. It serves a low-income, minority student population – 73 percent are Hispanic, 18 percent are African American, and 93 percent qualify for a free or reduced lunch, a federal program based on family income.

After a number of leadership and management changes, the school reopened in 2008, and was granted "innovation status" by the state to come up with new, effective ways to meet the needs of its diverse and constantly changing student population. In return, the state granted the school leaders more autonomy.

The school launched the Very Young Composers program this year with its third graders. It plans to expand the program next year by adding 25 fourth graders.

A cohesive team of educators at the school teaches visual arts, music, physical education and dance, along with the librarian, who offers creative storytelling, and a

technology teacher for sound engineering. They collaborate daily and discuss the kids and what they are learning. And, they are all certified to teach English language learners.

"We have an incredible team that focuses on culture and creating community, traditions and space for kids to feel safe and creative," says Cairns, a veteran music teacher who was instrumental in getting the young composers program into the school.

All students at Cole receive arts instruction daily and are never pulled out of art classes for more reading or math. "The freedom to make decisions at the

school level regarding budget, hiring, curriculum and professional development has been extremely useful," says Cairns. "I've made it my focus to ensure the arts get as much attention as math, English and science classes."

The Very Young Composers program is funded by a private foundation and a local philanthropist. The program, which pairs professional musicians with school, is thriving in New York City public schools in partnership with the New York Philharmonic and is slowly finding its way into other urban areas. It's a perfect partnership between the arts community, which has experienced a decline in patrons, and schools that lack art programs due to limited resources.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 42 percent of schools indicated they had partnerships with cultural or community organizations to help meet their school's arts education goals.

Show me the evidence

Decades of research shows that participation in the arts – music, visual arts, dance or drama/theatre – can lead to higher levels of self-confidence, persistence, civic engagement, creativity, problem-solving ability, and critical thinking skills in students. Moreover, the benefits of an arts education are more dramatic in schools where family income and achievement levels are very low.

The evidence from numerous studies has convinced many education professionals and policymakers to value arts as a critical component of a complete education. Even

so, supporters face challenges in providing a high-quality program when funding is tight, other concerns take precedence, and qualified instructors are few and far between.

That's where legislators come in. Their support can be vital.

"When times get hard, arts instruction should not be seen as a frill," says South Carolina Senator Wes Hayes (R), a member of the Education Committee. "Art is an important part of education – it's critical and needed, and legislators should provide a safeguard."

Hayes, who also co-chairs South Carolina's Legislative Arts Caucus, says, "The arts are a significant part of keeping businesses and recruiting and retaining talented workers. Legislators can tell that story and remind other legislators about the importance of the arts."

Ninety-three percent of Americans consider the arts essential to a well-rounded education, according to a 2005 Harris Poll. And 79 percent agree that incorporating the arts into the curriculum is the first step.

During the 2009-2010 school year, 94 percent of elementary schools offered music instruction and 83 percent offered visual art, such as drawing, painting and sculpture, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

And although "the percentages of students receiving music and visual arts instruction are quite high, there are literally millions of students who receive nothing," says Sandra Ruppert, director of the Arts Education Partnership at the Council of Chief State School Officers.

The students receiving little to no arts education tend to be concentrated in low-income areas and include students with special needs and English language learners. Ruppert points out that, while students from poorer schools have the least high-quality exposure to the arts, "the research suggests those kids tend to benefit the most from arts education."

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VSA Montana presents
workshops on autism
and the arts

VSA Montana, the state organization on arts and disability, in partnership with the Montana Arts Council, will present "Working in the Arts with Children on the Autism Spectrum," a workshop for teachers, paraprofessionals, teaching artists, and arts organization staff.

The workshop will include a discussion of characteristics and behaviors of children on the autism spectrum and interventions to help engage learners in the classroom setting. Brett Gilleo, LLC of Big Sky Therapeutic Services in Great Falls, who works extensively with children on the spectrum, will lead this session.

Marlene Schumann, an experienced arts educator who specializes in assessment strategies for learners of all abilities, leads a second offering that focuses on visual arts activities. These are designed to develop communication skills, increase social interactions and support the creative participation of children on the autism spectrum.

This workshop is free for participants and will be offered in two locations:

Fergus High School Art Room, Lewistown: 4:30-7:30 p.m.
March 13 and 9 a.m.-3 p.m.
March 14; and

Castle Rock Middle School Library, Billings: 4:30-7:30 p.m.
March 20 and 9 a.m.-3 p.m.
March 21.

For details, visit www.vsamontana.org/professional-development/.

Registration nears for Teaching Artists Weekend

The Montana Teaching Artist Weekend, a professional development and networking opportunity for teaching artists serving schools and communities across Montana, is April 17-18 at the Holter Museum of Art in Helena. Teaching artists fill a critical need for arts education for learners young and old in the Big Sky. Join the Montana Arts Council and Holter Museum of Art in Helena for a professional development opportunity that will help you sharpen your skills as an artist, educator and advocate for high-quality arts education for all Montana students.

This opportunity is open to teaching artists of all disciplines who provide hands-on learning experiences to learners in school, after school, and in non-traditional learning environments.

The weekend kicks off with an opening reception Friday night at the Holter Museum of Art with keynote speaker David Spear of A Voice. Spear is a teaching artist who has worked with students over the past decade at Two Eagle River School in Pablo, recording the stories of their community through photography. The reception will include oppor-

tunities for teaching artists to network, with refreshments and no-host beer and wine.

Saturday's agenda includes:

• **The Arts and Cognition with Lorrie Heagy**, 8:30-11:30 a.m.: Heagy is an elementary music teacher in Juneau, AK, and director of Music Matters (JAMM), an El Sistema-inspired program that provides string instruction for students. She is the 2011 Alaska Teacher of the Year, and her program at Glacier Valley Elementary earned the Kennedy Center's Creative Ticket National School of Distinction Award.

She'll offer a lively, interactive workshop for teaching artists of all disciplines on how learning in, and through, the arts impacts the brain. Topics include the arts and the brain, marketing your skills, and building strong school and community partnerships.

Two afternoon breakout sessions (12:45-1:45 p.m. and again from 2-3 p.m.):

• **The Arts and Healthcare with Youpa Stein and guests:** Stein, program director of Living Art of Montana, will discuss the organization's work in the expanding field of the arts and healthcare, a growing area of oppor-

tunity for teaching artists, and share experiences of using artistic expression as a way of healing.

• **Expanding Your Online Presence with Janaina Vieira-Marques:** Want to build a website, but don't know where to start? Not sure how to make the best use of technology to market your skills as a teaching artist? Teaching artist Vieira-Marques will offer some great resources and tricks to boost your online presence and help make more people aware of the great work you do.

The workshop closes with an Open Space, where participants suggest topics or questions they are interested in exploring, and self-select the discussions they would like to join.

Registration is free, but limited to 40 total participants. Lodging will be available at the discounted state rate to all participants.

For more information, check the MAC website at www.art.mt.gov or contact Emily Kohring at ekohring@mt.gov.